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## Reflection of Anatolian Culture in Poster Design

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### Abstract

‘Visual’ in ‘visual culture’ can be defined as “everything that is visual, functional, communicational and/or having aesthetic purpose produced, interpreted or formed by people” (Barnard, 2002; 34). Accordingly poster is not only a tool that transmits a message, information or that introduces or advertises a product but also a visual cultural element. Just like other visual cultural elements, poster as well is in interaction with the society. In this two way interaction while society’s culture, political and social perceptions, level of education, aesthetic tastes influence the production process of the poster, the posters too influence and transform the society.

Poster artists and designers are producing studies sometimes affected by the society that they are within, and also sometimes intentionally reflecting the culture of the society that they are addressing. In this context in this study, reflections of the Anatolian culture in poster designs will be examined with visual examples.

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### 1. Introduction

Culture is the sum of all values produced by societies within the context of their development and interactions with life. Culture is formed over the course of history as a composite of human emotions, thoughts, teachings and experiences fashioned by social processes. These social processes transform the lives, discourses and thoughts of individuals. Culture is a concept that lives, breathes and changes, capable of both shaping and of being shaped.

The history of Anatolia has followed a course parallel with that of its inhabitants, and has harbored numerous civilizations during various periods. Anatolia’s geographic location as a transit point has prevented the formation of introverted and isolated local societies, opening its inhabitants to the influence of many cultures both near and distant. Every civilization that has existed in Anatolia has absorbed the cultural heritage of its predecessors,

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allowing the creation of a cumulative Anatolian culture. Each one of these civilizations has been influenced by the thousands of years of cultural experience that preceded it, and has also contributed its own character to this cultural melting pot. A review of these different cultures' approach to art reveals that both the ancient societies of Anatolia and its newcomers (as well as those using Anatolia as a transit) have assumed a cultural structure that was dynamic, varied, rich and open to external influences.

Having hosted different cultures over thousands of years, the cultural heritage of Anatolia serves as a rich source of inspiration in present-day art and design. Furthermore, the living and dynamic aspects of culture, along with its ability to both shape and be shaped by society, tends to influence and encompass artists and designers as well. Artists and designers are influenced by the culture of the society in which they live; their thoughts, behaviors and teachings are tied and associated with the culture they experience. Excluding creative processes that are deliberately and consciously independent of such cultural ties, or which actively question them; the creative processes of humans are naturally influenced by the beliefs, behavioral patterns, values and traditions of society. In both present-day and past arts and designs, Anatolia has been a fertile source of influence not only with its rich world of symbols and imagery, but also with its countless myths, tales, epics sagas and well-known stories.

## **2. Visual Communication, Poster and Culture**

A culture and society's beliefs, behavioral patterns, values and traditions can influence design processes. In visual communication design, establishing effective communication requires the designer to use a visual language that the target audience can understand. A design centers around the visual presentation of certain messages to an intended audience. The messages contained within the design are composed of visual codes that are understandable for this target audience. These visual codes could be particular images, symbols or colors. The cultural codes shared by individuals living in the same society enables the message of the visual design product to be conveyed more directly and succinctly.

The poster is considered as the form of art that is physically the closest to the man on the street; it is a visual communication design capable of reaching the larger masses, and interacting with numerous people of all ages, cultures and socio-economic levels. The purpose of posters is generally to make announcements, to provide information, or to promote and advertise a product. To achieve this, accurate and effective communication must be ensured through the use of graphical elements and principles that appeal to the target audience and its visual culture. When designing posters, it is important to make effective visual use of cultural codes by first learning, understanding and analyzing the culture of the society in question.

## **3. Visual Culture and Visual Literacy**

At this point, it necessary to briefly expand the concept of "visual culture." Visual culture "can be defined as the process by which a culture makes expresses its values and beliefs through the use of signs, codes and various other means" (Parsa, 2004). On the street, the television, the digital environment and in printed publications, our environment contains an abundance of visual images. Many sources describe that culture in the modern world is structured almost entirely around visibility, and that we live in a world and century in which a culture overflowing with visual images has become dominant. Posters are also part of the visual culture. Akin to all other elements of visual culture, posters are also capable of interacting with society. Within the context of this bidirectional interaction, posters affect society in the same way that society's cultural, political and social perspectives, along with its level of education and aesthetic preferences, affect the poster design process.

In visual communication, individuals perceive and interpret the visual images in their surroundings according to their previous experiences and repertoire of visual codes. The perception of visual images requires a reading process that is similar to the reading and interpretation of written texts. "Individuals who encounter written or

visual artifacts should be designated as readers. ... Works of literature, works of music, works with visual meaning or television advertisements, in other words, all signs that are created with the intention of conveying a meaning are read, attributed meanings and analyzed according to their recipients' perception" (Parsa, 2004). In this context, and in parallel with the previously mentioned fact that the modern world is dominated by a culture based on visibility, it is possible to observe a shift from written culture towards visual communication, and that visual literacy is gradually replacing textual literacy (Prakel, D., 2011). In sum, "visual literacy" is defined as the ability to attribute meaning to visual messages, and to create visual messages (From Alpan, 2008: Heinrich, Molenda and Russel, 1989).

When considered from the standpoint of design, for a visual design product to convey its messages accurately and effectively, its designer must also have a high level of visual literacy, even before his/her readers (viewers). In this context, visual language that is accurately used in poster design is deciphered, disassembled and then reassembled by readers according to their own cultural, social and individual experiences. In other words, creative and active processes are involved not only during the design of the poster, but also during its analysis by the reader. "When analyzing a design, the viewer actively uses his/her own experiences and knowledge to understand the visual language of the design, and to reassemble, based on his/her own conditions, the different meanings it contains" (Alpan, 2008).

#### **4. Visual Culture and Poster Design In Turkey**

The development of posters in Turkey began with the social and economic activities that followed the declaration of the Republic. "The Ottoman state lacked advanced printing technology, as well as a tradition of commercial posters. Most posters at the time were prepared for charities and theaters, and consisted mainly of writing" (Altıntaş, 1992). During the first years of the Republic, posters were one of the most important instruments of visual communication. Regardless of whether they were prepared for cultural, social or advertisement purposes, it can be seen that posters during the initial years of the Republic intended mainly to educate and guide society.

During this period, the first examples of modern posters were prepared by İhap Hulusi Görey, who received his education in Germany. Having worked in the workshop of Ludwig Hohlwein during his education in Germany, İhap Hulusi Görey had come to adopt Hohlwein's design style. Beyond their function as instruments for promotion and advertisement, İhap Hulusi Görey's posters aimed to strengthen and to provide an identity to the newly founded Republic. Working with a photorealistic style, İhap Hulusi reflected onto his posters the social structure that the new government aimed to establish during the first years of the Republic.

The fact that graphic design products function exclusively as instruments of communication renders their relationship with the social background more pronounced in comparison to the other design disciplines, since it is mainly this social background that determines the program of these products. For this reason, the nation-state building process of the Republic can be best traced and read from the works of İhap Hulusi. The large majority of İhap Hulusi's works serve indications of this building process" (Köksal, 2011).

In most of his posters, İhap Hulusi showed human figures of modern appearance and with stylish attires, which served to convey to the younger individuals of the Republic messages pertaining to the expected and desired social order and appearance. Furthermore, figures of Anatolian rural countrymen, such as the ones shown in the works in Figure 1 and 2, contained visual codes that appealed to the habits of farmers, the target audience of such posters. "The poster prepared for the Ziraat Bank includes a white-bearded old man wearing a dark kerchief, jodhpur, waistband, waistcoat, with a cap leaning forward and his moneybox under his hand; he is resting his back against the wall of his bank under the mid-afternoon sun, smoking his cigarette with great pleasure, and uttering the slogan 'If you save money, you'll be at ease' ... This poster spread across Anatolia until it had reached every village coffeehouse" (Merter, 2006), (Image 1). The poster of the first Village Reading Book

depicts a farmer reading a book (Figure 2). The first Village Reading Book is thus presented to villager of rural, encouraging them to read.

Mengü Ertel, who has won many international awards with his cultural posters designed for theatres and festivals, has frequently made use of Anatolian cultural codes in his works. “Mengü Ertel has attempted to read both the temporal and spatial maps of the geography he lived in, always endeavoring to find its projections in the modern world.” The mosaics he used in the poster designed for the Istanbul Festival (Figure 3), the miniatures and calligraphy depicted on the poster for the theater play entitled “Murat IV,” and the calligraphy on the poster for the theater play entitled “İbrahim the Mad” (Figure 4) are examples of the visual designs prepared by Ertel based on the Anatolian cultural heritage.



Figure 1: Poster for Ziraat Bank, İhap Hulusi Görey.



Figure 2: Poster for First Public Book, İhap Hulusi Görey.



Figure 3: Poster for Istanbul festival, Mengü Ertel.

In the poster he designed for the theatre play entitled the “Epic of Ali from Keşan,” Ertel used the main hero of the play, Ali from Keşan, who is a simple and good-intentioned young man who eventually becomes a swashbuckler, or *kabadayı* in Turkish). Instead of using realistic imagery in his poster, Ertel used a symbolic depiction that included the main characteristics associated with the *kabadayı*/swashbuckler figure by Anatolian people (Figure 5). For the play entitled “Deli Dumrul,” Ertel designed both the poster and the stage scenery of the play, and made extensive use of a visual code based on rug (kilim) motifs. Ertel described the reason for using the rug motif as follows: “The rug is a uniting and complementing symbol for me. As the core [of the design], I have selected a motif that has been frequently used in traditional embroidery patterns, transmitted long ago from the Oghuz provinces to Anatolia. The scenery was created by reproducing this motif.”

In the composition of his poster for the “Moscow Olympics,” in which a flame and an olive branch are used together as symbols of peace and friendship, Ertel makes references to calligraphy (Figure 6). When describing this poster, Ertel explained how he made use of cultural syntheses as follows: “... By combining the graphic splitting formed by the visual effects of the flame with the impressions that our traditional calligraphy arts have left in me, I completed the burning fire at the point where it ended with a white olive branch.”



Figure 4: Theatre Poster Deli İbrahim, Mengü Ertel.



Figure 5: Theatre Poster Keşanlı Ali, Mengü Ertel.



Figure 6: Poster for Moscow Olympics, Mengü Ertel.

Similar to Mengü Ertel, Yurdaer Altıntaş also endeavored to create modern interpretations of traditional culture and experience in his poster designs. In the poster for the play entitled “Ben Anadolu,” Altıntaş depicted a Cybele figure, rendered according to his personal interpretation (Figure 7). In the poster he designed for this play,

which depicted sequences of important women who have lived in Anatolia throughout history, Altıntaş made reference to Anatolia's richness and fertility by using the Anatolian mother goddess Cybele.

In the poster designed by Bülent Erkmén, a graphic designer of national and international renown, for the "İstanbul as felt by" International Exhibition, İstanbul is compared to a labyrinth, with a structure reminiscent of calligraphic art (Figure 8).

Savaş Çekiç, who makes use of a variety of visual languages according to the issues and goals of his design subject, creates posters with authentic and strong graphic depictions. In the poster he prepared for the theatre play entitled "Akıllı Havada," shown in Figure 9, Çekiç makes a clear reference to miniature art. In the poster he prepared for the exhibition that displayed interpretations of a famous portrait drawn in 1970 by Nuri İyem, a painter renowned for his portraits of Anatolian women, Çekiç's use of cultural codes can be clearly observed (Figure 10). By including only the portion from Nuri İyem's work that corresponds to the face, Çekiç made references to the depth and complexity of Anatolian women. Based on their arrangement, the typographic elements of the poster represented the headscarf of Anatolian women, rendering the composition even more effective.

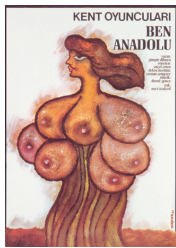


Figure 7: Theatre Poster Ben Anadolu, Yurdaer Altıntaş.



Figure 8: Poster for İstanbul as felt by Project, Bülent Erkmén.



Figure 9: Theatre Poster Akıllı Havada, Savaş Çekiç.

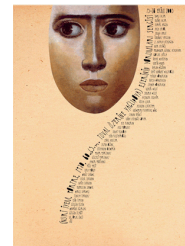


Figure 10: Exhibition Poster, Savaş Çekiç.

The development of technology, and especially of mass communication devices, has brought people across the world closer to each other, providing different cultures the opportunity to learn from one another. New technologies and devices-instruments have provided greater freedom to designers, and allowed their works to reach beyond cultural and global boundaries. With the internet, designers are able to create works by taking inspiration from countless different sources. On the other hand, such developments also present a risk of world-wide dedifferentiation and uniformization. Nevertheless, designers who can create new concepts and combine these with cultural codes by using strong and effective means of expression are capable of influencing society's visual culture and aesthetic preferences. For various cultural projects, Geray Gençer creates visual design products with strong and high-quality concepts, and uses a unique typography for each of his projects. With the characteristics of their imagery, the topographic elements in his posters become visual codes that reference its main content. Thus, aside from providing objective information, typography is used as an element that ties and connects concepts with content. Within the scope of the project performed to commemorate the Turkish folk music artist Neşet Ertaş' important contributions to Anatolian culture on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his artistic career, Gençer used visual codes that represented Anatolian culture (Figure 11, 12). For this project, Gençer designed a geometric display type he named "Bozkır Type," inspired from Anatolian motifs and visual heritages of rugs (kilim) (Figure 13). The colors used in the posters were selected from color tones commonly used in Anatolian rugs. In this respect, these colors represent a cultural code in themselves.

In his poster prepared for the Newroz celebrations (Figure 14), Gençer reflects the meaning and rituals of this day, which has been celebrated in Anatolia for centuries. Being in essence a reflection of the vividness and excitement that accompanies the new year and traditionally begins in the spring, the Newroz "is a traditional cultural event that has been celebrated for centuries by peoples across Central Asia and the Middle East for



different reasons and in different ways” (Arslan, 2006). During Newroz celebrations, the rebirth of nature is celebrated around a fire, and it is believed that jumping over this fire will cleanse of all troubles, and also bring fertility and abundance. In this poster, Gençer used fire and the figures of men jumping over the fire. This poster’s depiction of figures dancing the halay folk dance, by holding each other’s arms, in a manner that represents the spirit of equality and fraternity of the Newroz; its forms emphasizing the ancientness of Newroz as a tradition; and the kilim rug motifs within these forms are all noteworthy.



Figure 11: Poster for Neşet Ertaş, Geray Gençer.

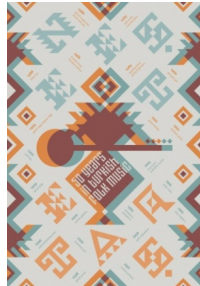


Figure 12: Poster for Neşet Ertaş, Geray Gençer.

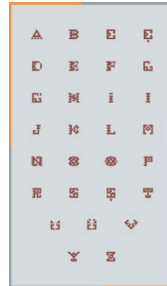


Figure 13: Bozkır Type, Savaş Çekir.



Figure 14: Poster for Nevruz, Geray Gençer.

## 5. Conclusion

Similar to other visual communication design products, the aim of posters as instruments of mass media is to convey messages accurately and effectively. The perception of these messages and the meanings attributed to them are associated with previously learned visual codes and cultural interpretations. For this reason, cultural codes that are used in content-related visual depictions of high esthetic value allow for a more direct and effective communication with the audience.

Reflections of Anatolian culture in poster design, along with the use of cultural codes that are generally used consciously depending on the designer’s knowledge of the cultural values of the society in which he/she lives (based on his/her upbringing) influences both the society’s esthetics preferences and its visual culture. Such design approaches contribute to the process by which Turkish poster designs are gradually transformed from a local cultural value into a universal visual language and identity with its own character.

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